

Hello, Hola, Bonjour!
Foreign Language Education Benefits Native Language Grammar, Literacy,
and More

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

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Abstract

Although there are approximately 6,900 languages spoken around the world, the United States does not have a national foreign language education program established in elementary or secondary schools. Unfortunately, this stems from a lack of money. While there is currently no nation-wide foreign language education program, the reality is that foreign language study can positively affect students, particularly in their native languages. Many studies have shown that if a student studies a foreign language, his or her native language grammar, literacy, language arts achievement scores, and overall cognitive skills will improve. I explore these topics and urge the United States to find money to support these types of incredibly valuable and enriching programs.

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Introduction

Spanish. Italian. Mandarin. Arabic. Russian. English. These are just a few of the approximately 6,900 languages spoken around the world. While the United States is typically known as a melting pot with its various cultures and accompanying languages, English is still the primary language of the country. With eighty percent of people living in the United States speaking English as their mother tongue, this leaves little room for language diversity. One solution to this problem is foreign language education. The origin of modern language education dates back to the seventeenth century when people taught and studied Latin. More recently, foreign language education programs have been implemented in many schools across the United States and around the world. However, in the past decade, foreign language education in elementary schools has only increased ten percent from twenty-two percent to thirty-one percent, according to A National Survey of Foreign Language Instruction in Elementary and Secondary Schools. The unfortunate truth is that there is either not enough money to support these types of programs or there is only enough money to focus on programs in the secondary schools. While there is currently no nation-wide foreign language education program, the reality is that foreign language study can positively affect students, particularly in their native languages. Many studies have shown that if a student studies a foreign language, his or her native language grammar, literacy, language arts achievement scores, and overall cognitive skills will improve. However, unless the United States takes action soon, students will not reap the benefits of such an important educational program.

Background Information

Current State of U.S. Foreign Language Study

In today's education system, foreign language education is not a priority in the United States due to the lack of funding. School systems are constantly wrestling with tight budgets, and foreign language education is often cut or eliminated because of the emphasis on standardized testing and core subject areas like reading, math, etc. From 1997 to 2008, "the percentage of public and private elementary schools offering foreign language education decreased from 31 to 25 percent", and "instruction in public elementary schools dropped from 24 percent to 15 percent" (Altschuler, 2012). While many school systems have developed foreign language programs, there are still many more school systems with no foreign language study at all because the Foreign Language Assistance Program funding was eliminated. In 2010, the United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said, "only 18 percent of Americans report speaking a language other than English, while 53 percent of Europeans (and increasing numbers in other parts of the world) can converse in a second language" (Altschuler, 2012). This statistic regarding foreign language education in the United States and in other countries shows the shocking difference in how school systems around the world approach foreign language study.

Current State of Other Countries' Foreign Language Study

While the United States does not emphasize the importance of foreign language education, other countries around the world dedicate more time and money towards teaching children different languages. For example, Europeans celebrate The European Day of Languages every year on September 26. This annual celebration aims to "alert the public to the importance of language learning, to

promote the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe and to encourage lifelong language learning in and out of school” (“European Day of Languages”, 2009). Both children and adults are encouraged to take up a new language as well as celebrate their native language. On this particular day, organized events like language classes and television programs encourage everyone to participate in these cultural festivities. European countries also focus on teaching foreign languages early rather than waiting until secondary school or any type of higher education. For example, Finland offers pre-school foreign language education in five different languages including Finnish, Swedish, and sign language. This foreign language education is not required, but it is encouraged. However, in primary school, all students must study two languages other than their mother tongue. One of these new languages must be the second national language, Finnish or Swedish. Another country that emphasizes early foreign language education is Romania. In kindergarten as well as grades one and two, foreign language education is optional. However, beginning in grade three, it is required of all students. This requirement encourages students to become more familiar with different parts of the world and their respective languages.

In Germany, foreign language education is an extremely important component of their school system, even at the primary level. For example, most of the German federal states offer foreign language education at a young age, typically around the age of eight, but some schools do offer foreign language education earlier. English, Chinese, Japanese, and Czech are just some of the many different foreign languages taught in German schools. In secondary schools, at least two foreign

languages are required: English and typically either Latin, French, or Spanish. Since the number of non-German students that attend German schools has increased over the years, the schools work to make adaptations for these students. Those children that were not born in Germany or do not live with German speaking parents are “offered additional lessons in the form of preparatory classes, bilingual classes, intensive courses and remedial courses depending on the State” (“The ABCs of the German School System”, 2011). Foreign language education is also a priority in Sweden’s school system. In 1995, Sweden developed a new national curriculum that allowed students starting at age seven to learn English at school. A second language is required at age eleven or twelve, and students have the option to choose from German, French, or Spanish. Two years later, students do have the option to add on a third language in the Swedish schools.

Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP)

Unlike many other countries around the world, the United States currently has no national policy on foreign language education in elementary schools. However, in 1988, the United States Congress passed the Foreign Language Assistance Act. This act gave the United States Secretary of Education the power to provide grants to state educational agencies for foreign language education in both elementary and secondary schools. When President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, it began to fund the Foreign Language Assistance Program under Title V of NCLB. The Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP) provided three-year grants to states and their school districts in order to create or maintain foreign language programs from kindergarten to twelfth

grade. For example, the grants that FLAP provided to schools were used for many different activities including “classroom instruction, professional development, teacher recruitment, curriculum development, student assessment, program evaluation, and parent involvement” (Richey, 2007). The FLAP grants were competitively awarded, and a panel of foreign language experts scored applicants based on established criteria found in the Federal Register, the official journal of the United States federal government. These criteria included the current quality of the program’s design, the personnel, the need for the program, and the quality of the evaluation. The Foreign Language Assistance Program was a cost-sharing program; meaning that the grantees had to match 100% of the federal funds offered each year by using state or local funds. However, some schools that could demonstrate extreme financial hardship were eligible for cost waivers.

The Foreign Language Assistance Program benefitted a number of school districts by financially supporting foreign language education for students. As previously mentioned, the program was extremely competitive, and in 2006 and 2007, the foreign language expert panel from FLAP gave applicants “competitive priority points” if they offered foreign language education in certain foreign languages like Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Russian, and other languages in the Indic, Iranian, and Turkish families. In order to receive the “competitive priority points”, applicants also had to ensure that “instruction would be primarily during the school day to increase the likelihood that students would attain proficiency” (Richey, 2007). For example, the Glastonbury Town School District in Connecticut received a FLAP grant to support their Critical Need Language Initiative starting in

2007. The Glastonbury Public Schools wanted to expand their Russian and Chinese programs “with a focus on professional development, curriculum and assessment, and updated technology” (Richey, 2007). The FLAP grant would not only focus on improving foreign language education in middle and high school, it would also work towards developing an elementary school program starting at grade three.

FLAP was the only federally funded program that exclusively targeted foreign language education in both elementary and secondary schools. However, in 2011, President Barack Obama released his 2012 fiscal year budget proposal, and he wanted to eliminate the Foreign Language Assistance Program individual funding. Instead, he decided to combine foreign language funding with six other programs that made up the Effective Teaching and Learning for a Well-Rounded Education program. The other six programs included topics like economics, history, the arts, and civic education. Previously, Congress had given the Foreign Language Assistance Program \$26.9 million primarily to pay for educational grants. However, Congress made the final decision to cut FLAP funding, and this occurred during the fourth year of a five-year federal grant. American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) used their portion of the grant to create “nationally recognized language assessments” (Herbert, 2012). The assessments focused on gauging student progress and assisting in foreign language placements in higher education. However, the work of ACTFL that took place over four years went unfinished due to the elimination of FLAP funds. Some foreign language programs did continue, but many teachers lost their jobs and the developing assessments dissolved. According to Martha Abbott, the executive director of ACTFL, the Foreign Language Assistance

Program's elimination affected more than the funded schools. She explained that the money was "often used to pilot new foreign language classes that could then be emulated in other schools in each district", and "the pilot program teachers would then train other teachers to multiply each grant's effect" (Koebler, 2012).

The Glastonbury Public Schools, previously mentioned, have had an extremely strong foreign language program for the past fifty years, even at the elementary school level. There are 50 foreign language teachers for a student body of 7,000, and the school district offers six different languages. In December 2011, the Glastonbury Public Schools were recognized as one of twenty districts that have exceptional Chinese language programs implemented in their schools. However, the Glastonbury Public Schools were just some of the schools affected by this sudden change in funding. As one of the partner districts with ACTFL, they lost their foreign language education funding once Congress eliminated the Foreign Language Assistance Program. Before the Glastonbury Public Schools discovered that the FLAP funds were eliminated, the schools were using the money to develop new and innovative language assessments. Rita Oleksak, the foreign language director in Glastonbury, explained that the potential new language assessments would have gone "beyond studying reading, speaking, and writing", and they would have evaluated "how students can interact in a global society" (Herbert, 2012). Since there are currently no national language assessments used in schools, this could have helped create a stronger foreign language education system in the United States.

Foreign Language Benefits

Native Language Grammar

The benefits of foreign language education in primary school are expansive. Among these benefits, students who study a foreign language will positively influence their English grammar, literacy, and English achievement scores on standardized tests. Nancy Rhodes, the director of foreign language education at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington D.C., once said, “The more children learn about a foreign language, the more they understand about their own language”. Once a student begins to learn a foreign language, that student’s grammar use in his or her native language will improve. Students typically overlook grammatical structure in their native language because they take it for granted. When students attempt to read or write in a second language, they must focus on word order, verb tenses, and parts of speech, which are grammar skills that are often used subconsciously in a native language. Recognizing how sentences are constructed in a second language can help students become more aware of how sentences are constructed in their native language. The acquisition of a native language tends to come naturally, and the rules of this native language are simply accepted rather than consciously understood or questioned. As young children grow and develop, they become more and more exposed to their native language. Because of this constant exposure, children will hear appropriate grammar usage and mimic it without hesitation. However, when it comes to studying a foreign language, children may discover that they do not understand grammar rules in their native language let alone a foreign language. Once students begin to learn a foreign language, they are “forced to think about why certain structures work well and they tend to make

comparisons to their native language” (Stewart, 2005). Learning a foreign language can sometimes make students reexamine the components of their native language. Learning a foreign language can help a person clean up his or her writing, speech, and overall communication skills.

Speaking from personal experience, I know that studying a foreign language has greatly improved my understanding of English grammar because I did not truly understand it until I studied a foreign language. In my opinion, I believe that my school district did a poor job of teaching English grammar in primary school, and because of this, I did not understand English grammar usage beyond identifying simple terms like nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Once I entered middle school, I was faced with the choice of learning a foreign language or not. I ultimately made the decision to learn French because many of my friends also wanted to take French classes. However, once I started learning French, I struggled with all of the different verb tenses and conjugations. This was because I had never learned them in my native language: English. Prior to learning a foreign language, I was only familiar with the present, past and future verb tenses. While these verb tenses are the most commonly used in everyday conversations, there are still a number of other verb tenses that are often used when communicating. For example, I had never heard of the subjunctive verb tense prior to learning French. Because I had never been exposed to the subjunctive verb tense in English, I struggled with understanding the concept in a completely different language. It took quite some time to adjust because I had never consciously thought much about grammar usage. Once I became familiar with both French and English grammar, I discovered how much I enjoyed learning a

different language. Once I began college at Ball State University, I decided to take Spanish classes to expand my knowledge of foreign languages. Once I started to learn Spanish, I found it much easier because I was already familiar with the grammatical structure. However, I finally realized how much I learned from foreign languages when I was in an English course during my senior year of college. We were starting a unit on teaching English grammar, and the professor asked the class to write down an example of an imperative sentence in English. While my classmates sitting at my table struggled with completing this assignment, I immediately knew an example of an imperative sentence because of my foreign language background. I was only familiar with imperative sentences because I had learned about them in both French and Spanish, not in my native language. While I had used English imperative sentences in the past, I had no idea that those sentences were considered imperative until I was introduced to the concept in a different language.

Native Language Literacy

Along with grammar, foreign language education also helps improve students' overall literacy according to a study conducted by researchers at Richmond West Primary School in Victoria, Australia. While Americans like to think of the United States as a superpower, there are an alarming number of people who still struggle with reading. For example, "thirty-three percent of fourth grade public school students are at or below the 'Basic' level on the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading tests" ("Literacy Facts and Stats", n.d.). Unfortunately, many adults also struggle with literacy since "forty-three percent of

adults [read] at or below the 'Basic' level. This accounts for roughly 93 million individuals" ("Fast Facts", n.d.). This data shows that America still deals with illiteracy, so how can foreign language education help? While learning a foreign language at any age will help improve literacy, it can be especially valuable at a young age. For example, learning a second language can help encourage children to think about language, and this improves their early literacy development. Studies have also shown that "a child who learns that meaning can be represented in more than just one way, through exposure to another language, gains valuable insights into the nature of language which can subsequently benefit their English literacy skills" ("Does learning another language improve English literacy skills?", 2009). Similar to grammar, students are not always aware of literacy skills in their native language once they have acquired those skills. However, a student can compare the features of his or her first language to another language, and the structure of the first language can be better understood. The skills used to read in a foreign language are easily transferred to a student's native language, and this is why bilingual students have been more successful with literacy skills. In other words, "when reading in a second language the learner develops comprehension skills which research has shown are transferred into reading in their first language" (DeBourcier, n.d.). For example, reading comprehension is a process that can improve, especially if a child is starting to learn how to read. The latest research, according to researcher Aline DeBourcier, has shown that learning a second language can help a child comprehend a written language much faster and learn to read easily if that child is exposed to literacy in both languages. By age four, "bilingual children have

progressed more than monolingual children in understanding the general properties of the symbolic function of written language” (DeBourcier, n.d.). By age five, “they are more advanced than monolinguals and bilinguals who have learned only one writing system in understanding specific representation properties, even in English” (DeBourcier, n.d.). While learning a second language is beneficial to students who are starting to read, it can also benefit students who are struggling with English literacy. A second language can often provide a new beginning for these students and both language development and self-esteem can increase. The skills these struggling students will learn in a second language can, again, be transferred to their first language, and these cross-linguistic strategies can be applied to both languages. Second language learners tend to “develop and enhance their skills and strategies for decoding and making meaning from words and this transfers to English” (“Linking Languages and Literacy”, 2002). For example, in English, many words end in the suffix –tion. In Spanish, these words often end in –cion like “nación” which is the Spanish word for “nation”. If students are starting to learn how to read in English, they can make the connection between the English suffix –tion and the Spanish suffix –cion. If a student is reading a story in Spanish, they can make the association that a word ending in –cion will most likely end in –tion in English and vice versa. This unique connection between English and Spanish can help students identify different vocabulary words and will improve overall reading comprehension in both languages.

The correlation between first and second language literacy skills has been shown with different types of programs and languages. For instance, in Hong Kong,

China, a researcher named Herbert W. Marsh compared students who were taught in Chinese and students who were taught in English. They discovered that achievement in the first language, Chinese, and achievement in the second language, English, were enhanced by the English instruction. The intensive instruction in the second language, English, did not hinder student achievement, but instead it promoted the development of student achievement. The second language promoted the development of the first language, and this has been proven in many other studies completed around the world. While some people may think otherwise, “increasing the time in a classroom spent learning a second language does not decrease the time a student spends on language arts” (DeBourcier, n.d.).

Researchers found that literacy skills were used and practiced regardless of what language was used in the classroom, Chinese or English. Foreign language immersion programs seem to have the best results when it comes to improving native language literacy. For example, at a magnet school in North Carolina, kindergarten students are immersed in languages like French, German, and Japanese with no exposure to English grammar, vocabulary or spelling until third grade. In 2001, 94% of the third graders and 100% of the fifth graders at the immersion school scored at or above grade level in English reading. An immersion program is defined as a method of foreign language instruction where the school curriculum is taught through the medium of the language. In a total immersion program, students would learn entirely in the foreign language for the first few years of school. In Montreal, Canada, the first French immersion program was created in 1965. The goal of this program was to “provide English-speaking children

with functional competence in both written and spoken French, while at the same time promoting and maintaining normal levels of English development” (Bournot-Trites & Tallowitz, 2002). The immersion program began when students were taught in French for both kindergarten and first grade. English language arts instruction was introduced in second grade. Researchers found positive benefits to this immersion program, and they explained that the students who participated in this program developed “linguistic detective capacity” early on in their education. The researchers suggested that the students in the immersion program compared similarities and differences in both languages, French and English. According to the study, “this has positive effects on their skills in English, and helps them both to build vocabulary and to comprehend complex linguistic functions” (Bournot-Trites & Tallowitz, 2002). Because these students had been exposed to two different languages, they could compare them and use both sets of information to their advantage. The French immersion program in Montreal also reaffirmed the idea that a “transfer of skills” from one language to another developed among the students involved in the program. If a student developed a skill in one language, he or she could use that skill for proficiency in the other language. Students who know more than one language are at an advantage because they can draw from multiple skill sets and experiences that have been taught in different languages.

While students in North America have been proven to benefit in literacy from more than one language, other countries around the world have discovered that multiple languages will benefit a student’s native language, specifically his or her literacy skills. For example, a study was conducted in the Netherlands with

approximately one hundred Turkish children. Their first language was Turkish, and through playmates and daycare, their second language became Dutch. A man named Ludo Verhoeven studied the children's literacy development in both Turkish and Dutch, and he found a strong positive transfer of reading abilities in these children. According to Verhoeven, schools that first taught reading in a second language found that there was a strong influence of that skill on later reading abilities in a student's first language. He discovered that the reading skills students used were interdependent across different languages. While an immersion program would be ideal, I believe that any type of exposure to a foreign language can help improve a student's literacy in his or her native language. Although the FLES program, Foreign Language in the Elementary School, only uses five to fifteen percent of class time per week, it is still a better option than eliminating foreign language education altogether. A FLES program is how most people think of foreign language education. In this program, students study a second language throughout the school year. Classes in a FLES program typically meet every other day for a minimum average of seventy-five minutes per week. A FLES program "results in language proficiency outcomes that involve the production and comprehension of meaningful messages in a communicative setting" (Curtain & Pesola, 1994). Although the goal is proficiency in a second language, FLES students typically do not attain as high a proficiency level as students in an immersion program would attain because they are spending less time studying that language. However, I firmly believe that any foreign language education program will see results with student literacy since an immersion program is often difficult to fund.

Native Language Achievement Scores in Language Arts

Background Information

In addition to grammar and literacy, achievement scores on standardized tests, specifically English, tend to increase once foreign language education programs are implemented in schools. Unfortunately, standardized tests have become the main focus of education because these test results are quantitative and concrete. Each state has its own version of a standardized achievement test, and the scores of these tests have become more and more important in assessing student learning. Indiana has its own standardized test known as the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress-Plus (ISTEP+). This assessment is used to test students in grades three through eight in language arts and math, students in grades four and six in science, and students in grades five and seven in social studies. The ISTEP+ is a “standards-based test that measures how well students are meeting the state’s grade-level expectations” (“Testing in Indiana”, n.d.). Students who take the ISTEP+ test can receive one of three scores: pass, did not pass, or pass+. The goal for each school in Indiana is to have all students receive a pass or pass+ score, and if a student does not pass any content area of the ISTEP+ test, the school is required to provide remediation services for that student. The ISTEP+ is often referred to as a “high-stakes” test because it has important consequences for both the test-takers and the schools. This test can often determine the success of a student, and the scores can also determine if a school should receive more or less funding for the following school year. In the spring of 2013, 73.7 percent of students passed both the English/language arts and math portions of the ISTEP+ test, according to the

Indiana Department of Education website. While this percentage is well over 50 percent, school districts are always looking to increase their scores by more and more every year, and foreign language study will help increase these achievement scores.

Research

Researchers like Miles Turnbull, Doug Hart, and Sharon Lapkin have conducted countless studies, and they have all discovered the impact of foreign language education programs, especially when it comes to language arts achievement test scores. Foreign language learners consistently outperform students who do not receive any foreign language education on achievement tests, and often times they outperform their counterparts significantly. For instance, in Louisiana, sixteen public schools participated in an experiment where third, fourth, and fifth graders from all of the schools would enroll in a foreign language program similar to the FLES program with either French or Spanish as the foreign language. These students would remain enrolled in this foreign language program for three consecutive years. On the other hand, there were students who did not participate in any foreign language program, the control group. All fourth grade students participating in the study took each Louisiana Educational Assessment Program for the 21st Century (LEAP 21) subtest, the official Louisiana standardized test. The students who were enrolled in the FLES program outperformed the students who did not take a foreign language in every subject area. For example, the students in the FLES program had a mean standard score of 312.42 in language while the

students not in the FLES program had a mean standard score of 299.41 in language. This was also true of the math, science, and social studies subtests on LEAP 21.

Another example of English achievement scores increasing due to foreign language education programs is in Ontario, Canada. Approximately five thousand students were enrolled in foreign language immersion programs, and researchers studied these students' achievement test scores in reading, writing, and mathematics. In grade three, they found that "the test scores of immersion students were comparable to scores of students in the regular program" (Stewart, 2005). However, once students were in grade six, the test scores "surpassed those of students in the regular program" (Stewart, 2005). In Kansas City, Missouri, an independent public charter school teaches most subject areas in French, and language arts instruction in English is introduced in the first grade. According to two researchers Laura Boss and Patricia McLean, nearly all of the students at this charter school had increased achievement test scores, and they surpassed students in other school settings who did have any instruction in a second language. Because achievement scores increase, foreign language education can also help close the achievement gap between students. Studies have shown that "children of color, children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, children of average and below average intelligence, and English Language Learners are the ones who benefit most from foreign language study by making the greatest proportional gains in achievement" (Boss & McLean, n.d.). Early foreign language study does not focus on previous verbal learning as much as other components of the elementary school curriculum. This allows many students to succeed who may otherwise have

struggled in school. The results of a study that was conducted at Purdue University also showed that the “average” student has the most to gain from a foreign language program. The study showed a significant relationship between the improved reading scores of children of average intelligence and taking a year or more of foreign language. This is because the “extended foreign language study gives students of average intelligence a kind of enrichment they may not be getting from other studies or experiences” (Boss & McLean, n.d.). Since I have studied more than one foreign language for approximately ten years, I feel confident saying that foreign language study can provide a unique type of enrichment that can be much more effective for students than the traditional classroom experience.

Because of my foreign language background, I was able to participate in a number of interesting and different activities in high school that were not available to those students who did not take a foreign language. For example, during my senior year of high school, my French class went to a local French restaurant for a field trip. My French teacher wanted us to pretend like we were in France so the menu was in French and we also had to order our food in French. While it was at times frustrating, I also found this new experience to be extremely rewarding and exciting since I had never been outside of the country. This field trip transported me to France, a place I had always wanted to visit, and if I had not taken French classes in high school, I would have never been exposed to such a culturally enriching field trip. Once I arrived at Ball State University, I decided to take Spanish classes because I fell in love with learning foreign languages. During my senior year of college, one of my Spanish professors required everyone in the class to tutor other Spanish

students who were in lower level classes. After being a Spanish student for nearly four years, it was my turn to be the teacher. Because I am an elementary education major, I found this experience especially rewarding because it forced me to think about how to teach a foreign language to others. At first, I struggled with the assignment, but I found that with more time and practice, I grew to thoroughly enjoy my tutoring sessions. Without my foreign language classes, I would have never been able to pretend I was in France ordering food at a restaurant or tutor Ball State students in Spanish. Students who learn a foreign language receive a special type of learning that other students do not receive if they choose not to take a foreign language. This enrichment, particularly for the “average” student, can increase all achievement scores, especially language arts achievement scores. Many of my foreign language teachers throughout the years have pushed me to try new, challenging, and frightening experiences. However, these experiences have been more effective and engaging for me than more traditional approaches to education. Students who learn a foreign language tend to increase their achievement scores on tests because they have been exposed to unique opportunities like the ones I was involved with in high school and college. Foreign language education tends to be more about experience-based learning and foreign language teachers need to be creative and use out-of-the-box thinking in order to help students understand the concepts. Many students benefit from this type of learning and traditional instruction in the native language does not always emphasize creative thinking. As previously mentioned, education is now focused more on emphasizing standardized testing and high achievement scores. The curriculum for students has become more

and more demanding, and there is little time for “fun” activities. However, the nature of foreign language education is exactly that: creative and engaging. If schools want to see higher achievement scores from their students, they need to consider making education more interactive and exciting for students. Foreign language education focuses less on monotonous lectures and more on experiencing and exploring languages that are spoken in different places around the world. This type of instruction is what students crave, and this type of instruction is what is needed in order to see successful results from students on achievement tests.

Native Language Vocabulary

A major component of an English achievement test is vocabulary, and if students choose to learn a second language, their English vocabulary will improve dramatically. According to author E.D. Hirsch’s feature article titled “Reading Comprehension Requires Knowledge—of Words and the World”, “low comprehension is ruining [poor children’s] chances for academic success. Among all children, comprehension scores are stagnant. Convincing research tells us that the key to both problems is to systematically build children’s vocabulary” (Hirsch, 2003). Many studies have shown that a student’s range of vocabulary can increase reading comprehension and it can also facilitate further learning. This increased reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge is what can help students increase their scores on high-stakes tests. As previously mentioned, skills and knowledge that is acquired in one language are transferrable to another language. If a student learns vocabulary in a foreign language, they can use that vocabulary in their native language as well. Also, vocabulary knowledge is directly related to

reading and oral comprehension. If a student has a strong sense of vocabulary, she is much more likely to succeed in overall literacy and its corresponding achievements tests. In vocabulary acquisition, “a small early advantage grows into a much bigger one unless we intervene very intelligently to help the disadvantaged student learn words at an accelerated rate” (Caccavale, 2008). A study was conducted at a Japanese university to examine the benefits of extensive reading in English. Researchers found that “students who reported reading more English books experienced significantly greater improvement in reading ability and vocabulary knowledge than those who reported reading less” (Ahmad & Asraf, 2003). The students also reported that this reading program helped improve their confidence with English vocabulary.

In Steven A. Stahl’s article titled “How Words are Learned Incrementally Over Multiple Exposures”, he explains that when a person knows a word, he or she also knows how that word can be used in multiple contexts. He then goes to say that children who are exposed to words in multiple contexts “can be presumed to learn more about those words than students who see a word in a single context” (Caccavale, 2008). Foreign language instruction can provide students with access to words across multiple languages or contexts with multiple connections to the words in their own languages. Again, these skills are transferrable from language to language. For example, the origin of many English language words can be traced back to the Spanish language. “Banana” in English is also “banana” in Spanish, and students who are learning Spanish would be able to make this connection between both languages. If students see the word “banana” in both English and Spanish, they

will have more experience with the word because they have seen it in multiple contexts whereas students who only speak English will have only seen the word in English. This is true of all words whether the word is exactly the same in two different languages or not.

Cognitive Skills in Native Language

Learning a foreign language also benefits students' overall cognitive skills that are used in language arts as well as all of the other subject areas. Hundreds of studies have concluded that early language study will result in substantial benefits to the developing brain. Overall, cognitive skills are defined as the "underlying brain skills that make it possible for us to think, remember, and learn" ("Cognitive Definition", n.d.). These skills include creativity, memory, attention control, reading development, and problem solving. While creativity is not a skill that is often practiced in today's education system, it is still an extremely important skill especially with young children. Most scientists agree that language is primarily a left-brain function, the analytical side of the brain. Learning a second language improves creativity because it creates new pathways between the left and right sides of the brain. Creativity is used in all subject areas, but it is especially used in language arts since most types of writing are inherently creative. Foreign language education also positively affects divergent thinking, another important cognitive skill. Divergent thinking includes tasks like flexibility, originality, fluency, and adaptability/willingness to change. The results of two similar studies conducted by both Richard Landry and Kenji Hakuta showed that children who studied a foreign language showed "greater mental flexibility, creativity, divergent thinking, and

higher order thinking skills” (Winne, 2007). They believed that foreign language education was the sole factor that positively affected these cognitive skills. The reason for the increase in cognitive skills is that “as children switch from one language to another, they look at ideas from different perspectives. They develop a sense of how to approach a new situation with new solutions” (Winne, 2007). Because students are familiar with multiple languages, they can use those different perspectives to solve problems and think critically. The studies also showed that students who learned foreign languages had better listening skills and a sharper overall memory than those students who did not study any foreign languages. An experiment was conducted in London, England where dual language preschool students showed cognitive advantages when performing certain tasks compared to single language preschool children who performed the same tasks. Researchers concluded that being a dual language child “allows that child to participate in two social worlds and become more attuned to subtleties of communicative interactions” (Stewart, 2005). These students can draw from twice the amount of experiences because they are familiar with two languages, and this has shown to improve overall cognitive skills in both of the languages. Students who learn a foreign language truly have better overall cognitive skills than students who do not learn a foreign language because they are exposed to different sounds that have meaning in another language. Although those sounds may be constructed in different ways than the students’ first language, students can still “compare and contrast the ways different languages use combinations of letters and sounds to create meaning” (Stewart, 2005). With foreign language study, students are more aware of how

letters and sounds can be put together to create meaning, and this increases cognitive awareness.

Other Benefits

A study conducted by researcher Jim Cummins have also shown that foreign language study helps train a child's mind to problem solve and it also gives a child insight into his or her native language. An "interdependence" hypothesis has evolved among researchers and many of them believe that "there is a transfer of academic knowledge and skills across languages and that a strong foundation in one language facilitates second language development" (Winne, 2007). While foreign language education can benefit anyone, there is an optimal time to study a second language. Younger children are much more receptive to learning a new language because their brains are still developing. Some researchers, like Marilyn Shatz believe that there are several periods throughout a person's life when foreign language education is the most beneficial. However, other researchers, like Harry Chugani believe that the optimal time to learn a foreign language ends between the ages of ten and twelve. Because of this information, I firmly believe that foreign language education programs should begin in the elementary schools so that students have the best chance to learn a foreign language and retain the information. For example, my elementary school had a Spanish education program where a foreign language teacher would come into all of the fourth and fifth grade classrooms and teach beginning Spanish words and phrases to the students. When I was in fourth grade, I was extremely excited to participate in the program, and to this day, I still remember the song we learned about the days of the week in Spanish.

However, once I started fifth grade, the foreign language program had been cut due to lack of funding. Unfortunately, this is the issue that many foreign language education programs face.

With all of these appealing benefits, foreign language education should be a priority in schools, but this is certainly not the case. Foreign language education in schools depends on funding, and school districts often do not have the means in their budgets to support these types of programs. However, I believe that the United States, along with the rest of the world, should focus more on the foreign language deficit by investing more money into foreign language study. Why? Foreign languages are required for many careers and this number is rapidly increasing. The world needs “diplomats, intelligence and foreign policy experts, politicians, military leaders, business leaders, scientists, physicians, entrepreneurs, managers, technicians, historians, artists, and writers who are proficient in languages other than English” (Altschuler, 2012). The world needs these people to be fluent in less commonly taught languages in order to cater to the strategic and economic interests of countries around the globe. In such an interconnected and competitive world, foreign languages will help set students apart who will eventually become future employees of the world. In addition to all of the language arts benefits, foreign language education also promotes a sense of cultural understanding. The study of another language can help students develop cultural pluralism, an appreciation for other cultures that exist around the world. Only through their languages can students truly understand, appreciate, and connect to other cultures.

Conclusion

My experiences with foreign languages have been nothing but positive, and I have learned so much about not only myself but also the world around me. I urge schools across the country and across the globe to consider investing in such an incredibly valuable and rewarding program. I also urge both the President of the United States and the United States Congress to allocate funds in each school district's budget to implement foreign language education programs across the country, particularly in elementary schools since this is the optimal time to introduce foreign languages. A student's grammar, literacy, vocabulary, language arts achievement test scores and overall cognitive skills in his or her native language will benefit from learning a foreign language because the skills that that student acquires when learning a foreign language can be transferred to his or her native language. Also, the experiences that are associated with foreign language study are often more engaging and exploratory. This type of learning can be more effective for "average" students or struggling students, and foreign language education can be the type of enrichment that these students need in order to succeed in their native language. While the demand for foreign language courses is at its highest level since 1968, the United States simply cannot meet this demand due to monetary restrictions. However, with its countless benefits, foreign language education should not be ignored because it can ultimately change the way students perceive the world, others, and themselves.

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